

International Perspectives on Literacy

Raising standards in reading and writing: Insights from England's National Literacy Strategy

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In England in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several new educational initiatives were implemented. For English, these initiatives included a new national curriculum and a national assessment system that required all students in public schools to take tests in reading and writing at ages 7, 11, and 14. Despite these changes, concerns about standards in literacy and the quality of instruction, particularly in schools serving economically disadvantaged students, persisted (e.g., Office for Standards in Education, 1996). The U.K. government's response to such concerns was the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in virtually all primary schools in England in September 1998. (For background information on the NLS see the websites listed in the Sidebar.)

At a time when teachers of literacy in many countries are faced with implementing prescribed approaches and meeting new, more demanding accountability requirements, it is worth reflecting on what the NLS in England has achieved to date and where it can be expected to go in the future.

What is the National Literacy Strategy?

The National Literacy Strategy is the U.K. government's major effort to re-

form the teaching of literacy and to improve students' achievements in literacy. The purpose of the NLS is to provide "a steady and consistent strategy" for raising standards in literacy over a 5- to 10-year period. The following are the main Strands of the NLS:

1. A *Framework for Teaching* (Department for Education and Employment, 1998a) sets out teaching objectives for each term for children in the 5–11 age range and provides a structure of time and class management for the daily Literacy Hour (explained later). The *Framework* notes that further literacy work should be productively linked to other curriculum areas and that additional time may also be needed for reading to the class, for students' independent reading (for interest and pleasure), and for extended writing (especially for older pupils).
2. An ongoing programme of professional development for all primary teachers centres on a Literacy Training Pack (Department for Education and Employment, 1998b) and related materials.
3. Community-based elements of the NLS include media campaigns, a National Year of Reading, Summer Literacy Schools, and a range of recommendations for agencies and institutions (including universities) involved in the teaching of literacy.
4. Achievement targets related to performance on national tests include this initial target: By 2002, 80% of 11-year-olds should reach the target expected for their age in English (Level 4 on the National Curriculum Assessment in English reading). Local Education Authorities

have also been encouraged to establish their own targets in line with the national targets.

Since the strategy was first implemented, a number of additional support programmes and packets have been provided. These include an *Early Literacy Support Programme* (Department for Education and Skills, 2001a) for children who are falling behind at Key Stage 1 (ages 5–7) and an *Additional Literacy Support Programme* (see Department for Education and Employment, 1999a; Stainthorp, 2000) for students with difficulties in the early stages of Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11). Additional support materials include *Grammar for Writing* (Department for Education and Employment, 2000) and *Supporting Pupils Learning English as an Additional Language* (Department for Education and Skills, 2002a).

Reading and writing in the Literacy Hour

Teaching in the National Literacy Strategy is delivered through a structured Literacy Hour that all public elementary schools must implement, unless they can provide evidence that an alternative, equally effective programme has been put in place. The elements of the Literacy Hour are

- shared reading and writing with the whole class on text-level objectives (15 minutes);

Websites for more information

Basic Skills Agency (England and Wales): <http://www.basic-skills.co.uk>
National Literacy Strategy site (England): <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy>
Department for Education and Skills (U.K.): <http://www.dfes.gov.uk>
Office for Standards in Education (England): <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk>

- work with the whole class on sentence- or word-level objectives, such as structured grammar and phonic work (15 minutes);
- guided reading and writing in small groups under the direction of the teacher, or independent work (20 minutes); and
- a plenary session with the whole class where objectives are reviewed (10 minutes).

Teaching approach. The Literacy Hour involves explicit, direct teaching in each element. On the basis of research on school effectiveness, which points to the key role of schools and teachers in improving student learning (particularly in the primary school years), allocation of teacher attention and "time on text" are maximized (see Beard, 1999, 2000, for overviews of this research). Advice is provided on the range of questioning that can be used in direct teaching, and guidance is given on training pupils to work independently so that teachers can work with one group at a time. The development of teacher professional knowledge is supported by a network of literacy consultants who are employed by Local Education Authorities (school districts) to work with schools. Implementation is also supported by inspection of lessons.

Phonics and spelling. There is provision in the National Literacy Strategy for consistent and systematic attention to the teaching of the English alphabetic writing system in reading and writing (spelling). Phonics and spelling work for each year are set out in the *Framework for Teaching* (Department for Education and Employment, 1998a), while additional support is provided in the *Progression in Phonics for Whole Class Teaching* (Department for Education and Employment, 1999b). The relatively strong emphasis on phonics reflects the concerns found in school inspection reports in England in the

mid-1990s regarding the quality of reading programmes in general and phonic instruction in particular (e.g., Office for Standards in Education, 1996).

Reading. In addition to phonics, the National Literacy Strategy provides for shared reading and guided reading. At Key Stage 1 (ages 5–7), teachers use shared texts to read with the class, focusing on comprehension and on specific features of the text, including punctuation, the layout and purpose of the text, and the structure and organisation of sentences. At Key Stage 2, shared reading is used to extend reading skills, with teachers using this strategy to teach and reinforce grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary work. Teachers are advised to use texts that are beyond the independent level of students.

Writing. Both the compositional and presentational aspects of writing are addressed through "text-level" work in composition; "sentence-level" work in grammatical awareness, sentence construction, punctuation, and spelling; and "word-level" work in spelling, vocabulary, and handwriting. In addition, the *Framework for Teaching* (Department for Education and Employment, 1998a) contains the recommendation that teachers provide opportunities for extended writing. Two broad approaches to teaching writing are implemented. They are shared writing (the teacher and pupils jointly construct a text) and guided writing (where the teacher supports and encourages students who are tackling a similar task and monitors their use of a range of skills and processes in writing).

Evaluation of the strategy

Information on the progress of the National Literacy Strategy can be obtained from analyses of achievement data, reports on inspections, external evaluations of the strategy, and reports on smaller studies of its implementation.

The NLS has been successful to the extent that 75% of 11-year-olds reached Level 4 or higher on national curriculum tests in English (reading and writing) in 2002. Although lower than the government target of 80% established at the launch of the strategy, it represents an improvement since 1998, when just 65% reached Level 4 or higher. In reading, 80% of students reached Level 4 or higher in 2002; in writing, 60% achieved this standard. These figures are all the more impressive when one considers that students in the English system are seldom retained (social promotion is the norm), and students with less severe special educational needs, including most students with specific learning difficulties/dyslexia, take the national tests (though appropriate forms of assistance may be provided). There is some evidence that performance in reading has leveled off, with scores close to 80% over the past three years, while performance in writing is still improving, albeit from a much lower base (Department for Education and Skills, 2002b). Data for 2002 indicate that 6% more girls than boys achieved Level 4 or higher in reading, while 16% more girls than boys did so in writing. It has been acknowledged that improvements in national test scores have been impressive, particularly in the early years of the strategy (Earl et al., 2000), but we must not be quick to infer that increases in achievement can be attributed to increases in student learning (Goldstein, 2002). There have been suggestions that some of the improvement may be a result of preparing for or teaching to the test (Earl et al., 2001).

Evaluations of the National Literacy Strategy by the Offices for Standards in Education (OFSTED) have focused on the quality of teaching and the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy. Based on inspections conducted in a representative sample of 300 primary schools, OFSTED's (2001) report, covering the third year of the strategy, noted the points that follow.

- The quality of shared reading continues to be good, but there is not enough emphasis on the development of pupils' comprehension.

- The quality of teaching and learning in independent work did not improve (in 2000–2001).
- The coverage of phonics knowledge and skills in reception year and in year 1 (U.S. kindergarten and grade 1) is frequently too slow.
- There are too many lessons where word-level work is not covered at all.
- There is very little direct teaching of spelling within the Literacy Hour in years 5 and 6 (U.S. grades 4 and 5).
- The quality of the plenary session has not improved since the strategy began.
- The strategy has raised teachers' expectations of pupils with special education needs and has supported them in setting clearer objectives.
- Some schools concentrated in and around large cities face a major challenge in improving standards due to factors such as high turnover of staff and teacher absences.

External evaluations of the National Literacy Strategy, conducted by a group in Canada at the University of Toronto and funded by the U.K. Department for Education and Skills, have focused on strategy implementation in a broad sense. In their most recent report, Earl et al. (2001) raised concerns about long-term sustainability and the possibility that the strong focus on literacy (and mathematics) in schools might result in a neglect of other aspects of the curriculum, including the development of higher order thinking skills. Adopting the role of "critical friends," the evaluation group also wondered about the balance between central direction (which has been very prominent in the early years of the strategy) and local (school-level and Local Education Authority) initiative. The group pointed out that the provision of additional inservice professional development for teachers would be necessary to ensure continuance of the strategy beyond initial implementation.

Researchers in reading have provided some detailed descriptions of NLS implementation at the school and classroom levels, referring to both strengths and weaknesses in their work. For example, Fisher (2002) described the implementation of the Literacy Hour by 20

teachers in rural schools during its first two years. She found that, while teachers felt that their teaching had become more structured and focused, their focus was not always clear to the observer, and some teachers emphasized the product of the lesson (e.g., a particular type of text) rather than the learning process (e.g., how different forms of language affect the meaning or impact of the text). She also noted that the necessity of maintaining fast-paced lessons resulted in teacher-pupil interactions that were essentially controlling, and the pace of the lessons prevented some children from reflecting on their learning and exploring ideas in more depth. She observed few opportunities for oral language development during the Literacy Hour.

In a series of articles by Wyse (2000, 2001, 2002), some of the approaches to teaching reading and writing in the NLS were criticized. According to Wyse,

- many of the tactics used in the NLS, such as stating objectives at the beginning of the lesson, are not supported by research;
- phonics instruction is most effective at ages 5 and 6, yet the strategy imposes it until age 9;
- a number of the grammar objectives contradict research showing that grammar teaching is an ineffective way of improving writing at primary level; and
- student motivation is not reflected in the NLS objectives.

A distinction can be drawn between the concerns of OFSTED, which tend to focus on the mechanical aspects of strategy implementation and the emphasis given to various elements within the strategy, and the more substantive issues of teacher development and program content raised by Fisher and Wyse. It is likely that the NLS will have to address all of these issues in the future.

Has the strategy been successful?

In reflecting on the first four years of the National Literacy Strategy in England, it is apparent that it has been successful to a point. We know the scores of 11-year-olds on national curriculum tests in reading and writing have

risen dramatically. However, it is unclear to what extent higher test scores reflect real gains in literacy. Goldstein (2002) noted that high-stakes tests can distort the very processes they are designed to measure. Moreover, he pointed to the relatively narrow conceptualization of literacy represented by England's national curriculum tests and, by implication, the dangers of defining literacy solely in terms of performance on the tests. Against this, however, Horner (2002) laid out the rationale underlying literacy tests administered to all students at the end of Key Stage 1 (age 7) and Key Stage 2 (age 11) and linked them to "state of the art" measures developed for recent international studies of reading literacy such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1999, 2002) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Campbell, Kelly, Mullis, Martin, & Sainsbury, 2001).

In any event, even more demanding targets for literacy achievement have been established by the U.K. government (Department for Education and Skills, 2002b) for 2004, including the following:

- 85% (of 11-year-olds) will reach Level 4 or above in English;
- 35% will reach Level 5 or above; and
- all Local Education Authorities should have at least 78% of their 11-year-olds at Level 4 or above in English.

The U.K. government has recently extended the National Literacy Strategy by introducing a Key Stage 3 National Strategy (ages 11–14) that covers English and other subjects and seeks to build on what has been achieved in the NLS (Department for Education and Skills, 2001b; see Harrison, 2002, for a review of research supporting this work). The targets for this strategy are that, by 2004, 75% of 14-year-olds will achieve Level 5 in English and that, by 2007, 85% will do so.

It remains to be seen whether such accountability measures can continue to drive the teaching of literacy and con-

tinue to raise standards in literacy in the next few years. It may be the case, for example, that reading test scores at Key Stage 2 have reached an upper limit and that future achievement targets may be unattainable. In such circumstances, the current approach of (a) supporting teachers through the provision of materials and professional development experiences aimed at implementing strategy elements and (b) putting pressure on schools and teachers to achieve results may prove untenable. It also remains to be seen whether a highly centralized and politicized strategy such as the National Literacy Strategy will be flexible enough to address the issues raised by Goldstein (2002), Wyse (2000, 2001, 2002), and others and make the necessary adjustments to empower schools and teachers to teach effective decisions about teaching literacy. The strategy's future may depend on such abilities.

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